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Exploration Of Mental Deterioration And Patriarchal Oppression In *The Yellow Wallpaper* Through The Theory Of Personality

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Article Details

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Freudian psychoanalysis, Theory of personality, unconsciousness, loss of self, influence of the patriarchal society depicted in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, analyzed from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Utilizing the central framework, Theory of Personality, the study examines how the narrator's surroundings—her husband and others—impact her mental decline, unconscious conflicts, and loss of self. The research additionally highlights Gilman's personal encounters that established her as a significant figure during the 19th century. The article utilizes a textual analysis to gain a more profound understanding of the text. The study demonstrates how societal dominance affects women, leading to the suppression of their emotions and aspirations for freedom, which ultimately causes mental instability and internal struggles. The narrator's deteriorating mental health stemmed from her compliance with her husband and societal expectations. The central aim of this study is to challenge the control over women and their aspirations.

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INTRODUCTION

The human mind, regardless of its state of health, governs all human actions. Nevertheless, a disturbed mind can significantly impact an individual's entire life in an instant, as it may operate in a deceptive and irrational manner.

For an extended period, it has primarily been women and young children who have been labelled as mentally disturbed, largely due to various historical periods that have contributed to their feelings of suppression in numerous aspects. However, as society moved towards modernity, men also began to be affected by the mental health challenges of the women around them. As per the World Health Organization (WHO), women have been at the forefront of experiencing depression and anxiety compared to men around the world.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a humanist, writer, novelist, feminist, and socialist who advocated for women's rights in the United States. Throughout her early life, Gilman endured and witnessed many challenges, including her father's abandonment of her mother, her marriage, and subsequently, postpartum depression. Gilman, similar to other forsaken children, has yearned for the love and presence of her father who abandoned his family. In various ways and for different reasons, she has essentially been deprived of both of her parents (Lemert, 2000). Much of her writing reflects these struggles.

In the 19th century, women were prohibited from writing or holding jobs outside the home. Their primary responsibilities included household duties, raising children, taking care of their husband's needs in return for joy and a life of prosperity. They led mechanical lives, fulfilling their husbands' orders and adhering to societal expectations. This ultimately caused distress for some women mentally at various points. And, Gilman was one of those women. One of Gilman's most recognized and highly regarded works is "The Yellow Wallpaper," a semi-autobiographical short story that she wrote following her healing from depression. Added to that, the short story was published in 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. This work illustrates her personal battle with depression which she experienced after the birth of her daughter, Katherine. Postpartum depression is a type of depression that arises following childbirth. It can lead to feelings of sadness, frequent crying, exhaustion, and fatigue, among other symptoms. The most extreme version of this condition typically affects women who are already experiencing some mental health challenges, and it is referred to as postpartum psychosis. In this case, hallucinations are the most prevalent symptom (Pokorna, 2013). This summarizes the experiences Gilman faced. The postpartum depressive phase intensified

significantly while she underwent the treatment of "rest cure" recommended by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell who is regarded as the genesis of neurology (Elena, 2021). The primary aim of composing "The Yellow Wallpaper" was to assist women of the 19th century who were struggling with mental health challenges which were exacerbated by their husbands and society too in the name of "rest cure".

The realistic approach in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a psychological examination, where Perkins conveys her own experiences and helps society understand the true horrors and pain of the psychological challenges that women encounter.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze the narrator's psychological deterioration using Freud's Theory of Personality and its connection to patriarchal suppression.
- To examine how the yellow wallpaper symbolizes the narrator's repressed unconscious conflicts and descent into madness.

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

1. How does Freud's psychoanalytic theory explain the narrator's mental breakdown under patriarchal oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper*?
2. What role does the yellow wallpaper play in reflecting the narrator's unconscious struggles and eventual loss of self?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper examines the main characters in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, first introduced in 1896. The focus of the analysis is on Freud's personality theory, which investigates the complexities of human behavior by categorizing the psyche into three interconnected parts: the id, ego, and superego. These components provide a framework for comprehending the character's internal struggles, emotional turmoil, and psychological deterioration throughout the story.

Id (consciousness): The id is viewed as the unconscious mind, a realm of instincts that is structurally separate from both the ego and the superego (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973).

Ego (preconscious/subconscious): The ego functions based on the reality principle, balancing between personal desires and societal limitations (Hall, 1954).

Superego (unconscious): the superego houses our moral principles (Pick, 2015).

This analysis employs Freud's "Theory of Personality," encompassing the id, ego, and

superego, as its conceptual basis to explore the psychological dimensions of both "the narrator" and "John" in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This framework allows for an examination of how unconscious desires, internal conflicts, and societal norms affect the behaviors and mental states of the two characters. The narrator's suppressed creative and emotional needs, representing the "id," clash with the restrictive societal and domestic roles imposed on her, which represent the "superego." Her ego, which strives to reconcile this clash, ultimately fails, resulting in her psychological deterioration (Barry, 2017).

On the other hand, "John" embodies the "superego," highlighting rational thought, discipline, and social conventions. His dual capacity as a physician and husband positions him as an authoritative presence, and his "ego" seeks to maintain control and order by dismissing the narrator's emotional and psychological realities. His stifling of her individuality, although framed as care, uncovers a deeply ingrained belief in patriarchal power (Tyson, 2006).

By applying this psychoanalytic perspective, the framework underscores how both characters function within clashing psychic structures, demonstrating the narrator's spiral into insanity as a result of unresolved intra-psychic conflict, and John's complicity as a byproduct of his own unconscious drives. Consequently, the framework enhances comprehension of the psychological and societal dynamics that lead to mental repression and gendered power struggles present in the narrative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gilman channeled her personal battles and experiences within a patriarchal society through her creative writing and imagination. The outside of the house is portrayed as a happy place, yet the inside reveals a broken, disordered, suicidal and despairing site. This reflects Gilman's own state, appearing well on the surface while struggling internally (Lemert, 2000). Gilman introduced a fresh perspective of hope by questioning the capitalist and dominant facets of America that feared independent women.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is not just a reflection of its era; it also serves as a reminder for contemporary society that mental health is more crucial than societal expectations or opinions of an individual (Revilla & Gorospe, 2024). It also highlights the fact that societal expectations impose restrictions on women and overlooks the harmful consequences resulting from those restrictions, and Gilman's narrative critiques this issue.

Fella et al. (2024) states that Gilman's story *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* emphasizes psychological elements while incorporating gothic elements—haunted house, the women concealed behind

the faded wallpaper, and the narrator's insane actions—to maintain an engaging narrative that explores themes of lost identity and the entrapment of madness. Additionally, it is Gilman's distinctive style that allows the reader to sense the narrator's mental state while also illustrating the repressive era of the 19th century. Furthermore, the patriarchal society and gender expectations are responsible for the difficulties faced by women.

Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis primarily based on the psychology of men rather than women. The narrative of *The Yellow Wallpaper* showcases how men's dominant psychology impacts women. In this context, John serves as a symbol of the prevailing societal belief that women should submit to men (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016).

Nawaz et al. (2024) states that Freud's psychoanalytic theory regarding "The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrates that societal pressure leads the narrator to a profound state of madness. The illogical norms and constraints imposed by her husband and the physician drove her into insanity. Through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, it becomes evident that society was the sole cause of the narrator's shattered mental condition.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory posits that an artist's creations provide insight into their inner thoughts. This is because art reflects the desires, fears, and frustrations that cannot be openly expressed or discussed. Sözen and Çolakoğlu (2023) argue that by using Freud's psychoanalytic theory, individuals can explore the subliminal fears and desires that control the mind of the protagonist. They also claim that the well-meaning husband, John, along with her nurturing nature, is actually harming the protagonist's mental well-being. It illustrates that what is deemed positive by societal standards may not be beneficial in practice.

This literature review emphasizes the previous contributions of various scholars regarding *The Yellow Wallpaper*, focusing on women's mental health from the 19th century to today. Numerous scholars have commended Charlotte Perkins for the awareness she brings through her writing, and as we delve deeper, we can observe how it illustrates the impact of control over women.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the text to delve into the psychological aspects present in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The focus of the analysis is on both the unnamed narrator and her husband, John, as it looks at their actions and mental conditions through the framework of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, first introduced in 1896.

The research employs a secondary data collection method, which includes the story itself,

scholarly articles, peer-reviewed journals, and reputable academic sources that explore the application of Freudian psychoanalysis in literature.

The study utilizes Freud's Theory of Personality—id, ego, and superego—to assess the internal struggles and psychological motives of the characters. The narrator's descent into insanity and John's logical, controlling demeanor are both examined in accordance with Freudian concepts of human psychology. This examination of both characters as a pair aims to comprehend the narrator's psychological decline as well as John's influence and reinforcement of her condition.

By analyzing both figures, the research seeks to reveal the unconscious motivations, repressive strategies, and relational dynamics that drive the psychological crisis depicted in the narrative.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The purpose of this article is to examine the narrator's psychological condition and her husband's dominant mindset in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" using psychoanalytic theory, particularly the theory of identity, which includes the id, ego, and superego. The main conclusion of the study suggests that the narrator experiences a mental breakdown due to the inner struggle between her id, ego, and superego. Those internal struggles were the result of societal expectations and suppression enforced by her husband.

The main finding of the study centers on the narrator's unconscious desire (id), for instance: "*I pulled and she ... paper*" (Gilman, p. 655). This statement is made by the narrator towards the conclusion of the story when she fully connects with the woman trapped in the wallpaper, reflecting her own experience and yearning to free the woman in order to liberate herself, driven by her husband's oppressive patriarchal influence (superego), for example: "*John says the ... bad*" (Gilman, p.648). This illustrates the societal and moral pressures embodied in John, who stifles the narrator. This culminates in her fixation on the yellow wallpaper, which symbolizes the breakdown of her ego. For instance: "*personally I believe that ... good*" (Gilman, p. 648) indicates that the narrator initially held some authority at the beginning of the tale, but as the story unfolds, she ultimately loses her sense of self. This interpretation supports earlier findings by Golden (1992), who argues that the narrator's descent into madness is a consequence of the stringent constraints imposed by a patriarchal society during the Victorian period. Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar (2000) link the psychological damage inflicted by patriarchal oppression and social isolation to the experiences depicted in the literature of

women in the 19th century.

The narrator's delusions and insanity also symbolize a coping strategy (regression) employed to handle isolation and exert control. This research provides fresh insights into feminist psychoanalytic interpretations. These studies suggest that women, when confined to domestic roles, may respond with rebellion in psychological ways.

Furthermore, John, the narrator's husband, is portrayed as a man who believes that men and women are inherently assigned specific gender roles that they must adhere to (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016). The narrative in "The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrates how women are constrained by male authority and societal norms, and in their quest for autonomy, they often lose their sense of self. John's commitment to societal customs and gender expectations exemplifies his superego. His superego influences his conviction that he understands what is best for his wife. This is evident in the text when John states, "*I beg of you ... I tell you so?*" (Gilman, p. 652). This statement reveals John's expectations for the narrator, suggesting that she must recover for the sake of her husband and children in order to meet her responsibilities as a wife and mother.

This study specifically examines the narrator's and his husband's character through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, which creates some limitations. Subsequent researchers might consider exploring the other character's perspective as well or contrasting this character analysis with other works that depict female mental challenges.

CONCLUSION

A disturbed or unhealthy mind serves no purpose. It compels the individual to confront one suffering after another. Investigating the narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper under the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of personality allows us to gain a deeper insight into her psychological conflicts. The reason for her psychological instability stemmed not only from societal oppression but also from the inner thoughts and unexpressed desires that confined her, leading to a division of her mind into various personalities—id, ego, and superego. Her deepest yearnings and emotions (Id) were consistently overlooked by societal norms (superego), and in her struggle to juggle these opposing forces (ego), she ultimately loses her sanity and flees from reality.

This narrative does not focus solely on one woman but instead highlights the harsh realities of a world that prioritizes power and human-imposed regulations over someone's freedom. It is challenging to accept that when the small needs and desires of an individual are

overlooked and restricted, it can develop into a significant issue over time. Gilman, however, had voiced her criticism of the patriarchal society and its control over women by opposing it and promoting awareness of the need to resist living doll-like lives.

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